Blackness Distilled, Sugar and Rum

María Magdalena Campos-Pons’s Alchemy of the Soul, Elixir for the Spirits

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ABSTRACT María Magdalena Campos-Pons (b. 1959, Matanzas, Cuba) is a Cuban artist with Yoruba (Nigerian), Chinese, and Spanish roots. She is also a black US-based artist. Known for performative and installation-based work as well as photography, paintings, and videos in which her body functions as resource, medium, and site, she has recently turned to more metaphorical representations of the body. History and memory, as well as the ritual (Lucumí or Santería) and material culture of her enslaved Nigerian and indentured Chinese ancestors brought to Cuba in the nineteenth century to work in the island’s sugar plantation system, have been key touchstones for her work. Since the 1990s she has frequently employed sugar as a material for critically exploring the complex workings of colonialism. Alchemy of the Soul, Elixir for the Spirits, commissioned by the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, Massachusetts, in 2015, is the most recent of her sugar works. The installation explored, metaphorically, the distillation of New England rum from Cuban sugar. This paper examines it in relation to Campos-Pons’s persistent interests, such as forced removal, migration, trade networks, memory, Lucumí/Santería, mestizaje, transculturación, and racism. It also examines the installation’s site to argue that the work explores black being in distinct but interrelated contexts: Cuba and New England. A powerful conjunction of objects, site, and performance, the work directed attention to a New England exceptionalism that persists in framing slavery’s violence as elsewhere.

KEY WORDS Black Atlantic, colonialism, Cuba, global trade, Lucumí, New England, plantation, race, Santería, slavery, violence

RESUMO Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons (n. 1959, Matanzas, Cuba) é uma artista cubana de ascendência yoruba (nigeriana), china e espanhola. Ela também é uma artista negra nos estados unidos. Elas e outras identidades trianguladas formam a base de seus treinta anos de carreira artística. Conhecida por seu trabalho performativo e baseado na instalação, assim como por fotografia, pintura e vídeo em que seu corpo funciona como recurso, meio e site, ela se dedicou ultimamente a representações mais metafóricas do corpo. História e memória, assim como o ritual (Lucumí ou Santería) e a cultura material de seus antepassados nigerianos e chinos esclavizados, que foram trazidos a Cuba no século XIX para trabalhar nas plantações de açúcar da ilha, são elementos chave de seu trabalho. Desde a década de 1990, ela empregou com frequência o açúcar como um material para explorar criticamente o complexo sistema do colonialismo. A instalação Alchemy of the Soul, Elixir for the Spirits, que foi encargada por el Peabody Essex Museum, en Salem, MA en 2015, es la más reciente de las obras azucareras de Campos-Pons. La instalación exploró metafóricamente la destilación del ron de Nueva Inglaterra a partir del azúcar cubano. Este artículo explora Alchemy of the Soul, Elixir for the Spirits en relación con los sitios discursivos de Campos-Pons (expulsión forzada, migración, redes de comercio, memoria, Lucumí/Santería, mestizaje (mezcla étno-racial), transculturación, racismo). También examina el sitio de la instalación para defender la tesis de que la obra explora el ser negro en contextos distintos pero interrelacionados: Cuba y Nueva Inglaterra. Como conjunto de objetos, sitio y performance, el proyecto también llamó la atención sobre la Nueva Inglaterra y el excepcionalismo del norte, que sigue pensando la violencia de la esclavitud como algo ajeno.

PALABRAS CLAVE Atlántico negro, colonialismo, comercio global, Cuba, esclavitud, Lucumí, Nueva Inglaterra, plantación, raza, Santería, violencia

RESUMO María Magdalena Campos-Pons (n. 1959, Matanzas, Cuba) es una artista cubana con raíces iorubás (nigerianas), chinas e espanyolas. Ella también es una artista norte-americana negra. Estas y otras identidades trianguladas están en el centro de su práctica artística há 30 años. Conocida por la utilización de performance e instalación, así como fotografía, pintura e vídeo, nos quais seu corpo funciona como recurso, meio e local, ela voltou-se recentemente para representações mais metafóricas do corpo. História e memória – bem como o ritual (Lucumí ou Santería) – e a cultura material de seus antepassados escravos nigerianos e escravos trazidos para Cuba no século 19 para trabalhar no sistema de plantação de cana da ilha – foram fundamentais para seu trabalho. Desde a década de 1990, ela frequentemente emprega o açúcar como um material para explorar criticamente o complexo funcionamento do colonialismo. A instalación de Campos-Pons, Alchemy of the Soul, Elixir for the Spirits, encargada pelo Peabody Essex Museum, em Salem, Massachusetts, em 2015, é a mais recente das suas obras de açúcar. A instalación explorou, metafóricamente, a destilación do ron da Nova Inglaterra.
Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons’s descent from enslaved Nigerian and indentured Chinese ancestors brought to Cuba in the nineteenth century is central to her artistic practice. As an artist working with installation, photography, video, and performance, she holds these identities and experiences in tension, exploring their intersectionality and their inherent volatilities. Campos-Pons’s work since her immigration to the United States has been deeply informed by her status as a Cuban-born artist in diaspora. Her move to Boston in 1991 coincided with a period of antagonized relations between the US and Cuban governments such that she was unable to return to the island for more than a decade; it was longer still until she was once again able to visit her hometown of La Vega in Cuba’s Matanzas province.1 Throughout her career, the artist’s diasporic imaginary has been shaped by the experience of double exile—her exile from Cuba as well as her ancestral link to the Middle Passage.2 What has received less consideration in the substantial body of literature on her work is how her experience of being black in her given site of self-exile, Boston, and the freedom narratives specific to New England and the northeastern United States, have also shaped her creativity and diasporic consciousness.

This essay considers the artist’s multimedia installation *Alchemy of the Soul, Elixir for the Spirits*, commissioned by the Peabody Essex Museum (PEM) in Salem, Massachusetts, in 2015 (Figure 1). The installation renewed Campos-Pons’s work with sugar, and was in great part inspired by the history, culture, and architecture of Matanzas’s sugar refineries (ingenios). For Campos-Pons, the sugar industry, from harvest to refining to the production of rum, offers a history lesson: “Sugar production, trade, and consumption contain the power structures of the world, and its repercussions are still present today. . . Sugar . . . caused the first and most cruel human trafficking in history; the lesson learned there is disguised in other forms today, and the imbalance of power that structures its reign are still alive in the twenty-first century.”3 As a Cuban-born artist and as a person raised in a former slave barracks, Campos-Pons (and not least her work with sugar) has inspired curators and essayists to explore the history of plantation dispossession in Cuba, including the material existence of black and Chinese bodies, which she has explored in and against colonial and racial processes of commodification and objectification. As I will argue here, the history of plantation slavery in Cuba is also intimately bound up with New England’s history of colonial entanglement, and it was precisely that entanglement to which *Alchemy of the Soul, Elixir for the Spirits* in its full complexity, referred. This was particularly true of a performance the artist staged during the course of the exhibition’s run.4

1. The most comprehensive treatment on Campos-Pons’s work and personal history is Lisa D. Freiman, ed., *Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons: Everything Is Separated by Water* (Indianapolis: Indianapolis Museum of Art; New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007). Biographical treatment with emphasis on the artist’s self-imposed exile is offered in Joshua Basseches, “Transforming Pain into Beauty,” in *Alchemy of the Soul: Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons* (Salem, MA: Peabody Essex Museum, 2016), 12–43. This catalogue, which also contains contributions by Nancy Pick and Esther Allen, was available as a limited print edition and also as an online e-book with video clips: http://alchemy.pem.org.


3. “Visual Healer: An Interview with Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons by Neon Queen Collective (Jessi DiTillio, Kaila Schedeen, and Phillip Townsend),” in *Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons: Notes on ‘Sugar/Like a Lonely Traveler: a Two-Part Exhibition Curated by Neon Queen Collective* (Austin: University of Texas at Austin, Christian-Green Gallery and Visual Arts Center, 2018), 10. I am grateful to Phillip Townsend for sharing this publication with me.

Campos-Pons began incorporating performance into her practice in the early 1990s. The medium allows her to extend the conceptual complexity of her object- and installation-based engagement with history into the here and now. In two early interviews, she described how her performance *Voice of the Silent* (1992) was “about what the silent means.” She asks, “What is keeping a person silent? The work is about the words that I don’t say, will not be saying, words that perhaps I fear. Not only me, the performer, but the viewer, too. It is a scream, in a way, a call.” Elsewhere she has stated: “I know how powerful a body is, just in being there. I don’t announce my performances, they happen... I’ve done performances to call attention to the artist as body and to issues that are less celebratory: it is not that I am in pain but I have pain and performance establishes a relationship with an audience which obligates them to reconsider the whole meaning of the work.”

The “whole meaning” of *Alchemy of the Soul, Elixir for the Spirits* necessitates not just that we attend to how the project used form and material metaphorically to engage the brutal history of Cuba’s sugar plantation past, but that we consider how the work might link Cuba’s past to the histories of places like New England that facilitated and benefited equally from that brutality. Indeed, the “whole meaning” of installations like *Alchemy of the Soul, Elixir for the Spirits* requires that we consider how the work relates to its sites, and, I will argue, how institutions commission and interpret works by artists of color who engage with colonialism’s entangled pasts and ongoing legacies. In the case of this particular installation at the PEM, Campos-Pons...

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translated her own family’s history within Cuba’s plantation economy to help New England audiences not only understand Cuba’s history but also, I argue, perceive New England’s historical ties to the economy of rum and sugar. These histories and historical ties matter still. Their legacies are long-lasting both there (Cuba) and here (the United States). As Alysha Goldstein has observed, “Colonialism in North America continues to be undone. It is unfinished and ongoing, yet it is also subject to interruption, contestation, and disassembly by Indigenous peoples”—and, I would add, by all people of color, whose bodies, lives, and communities continue to be unseen, continue not to matter.7

In what follows, I explore how Campos-Pons interrupted, contested, and disassembled the structures of violence that ensued from transatlantic and global entanglements around sugar, rum, and enslavement. In point of fact, what is commonly termed the “triangle trade” was more a complex, constellated network of points connecting the Atlantic, including the west coast of Africa, the Antilles, and North, Central, and South America, the coastlines of which were all dotted with ports where goods and bodies were traded. New England was a key site in this global trade system, as numerous historians have recently elaborated.8

To be sure, over the course of the nineteenth century, Cuba was “the largest slave colony in all of Hispanic America, with the highest number of enslaved persons imported and the longest duration of the illegal slave trade.”9 Alejandro de la Fuente asserts that sugar production and plantation slavery were fundamental not just to the prosperity the island colony experienced from the late eighteenth through the nineteenth century and even beyond, but also to the sense of well-being and legitimacy experienced by Cuba’s ruling classes, first as colonial subjects of Spain and then following independence. “Cuba,” de la Fuente writes, “was a colony that languished on the periphery of the Spanish empire for two-and-a-half centuries until the sugar expansion of the early nineteenth century pulled it from the shadows of the world economy.” As a result, the historiography of Cuba has constructed a “history of the island that is, essentially, the history of sugar.”10 Cuban nationalism, cubanidad, was intimately tied to the expansion of the island’s sugar economy.

The importance of sugar in Cuba is evidenced by the exponential growth of sugar mills on the island, which following the slave revolt in neighboring Haiti doubled from approximately five hundred in 1792 to twice as many by 1837.11 In her study of slavery’s expanding role in the development of both Cuba’s sugar economy and the island’s national ideology of racial and cross-cultural synthesis, Vera Kutzinski writes that “despite Spain’s 1817 treaty with Britain to ban the transatlantic slave trade by 1820,12 slave imports to Cuba reached “staggering proportions..." Between 1821 and 1860, more than 350,000 bozales, African slaves who had not been ‘seasoned’ elsewhere, were illegally shipped to Cuba, frequently with U.S. assistance. As a result, by the 1840s, “slaves and free blacks together actually outnumbered Cuba’s white residents.”12

By the late eighteenth and into the nineteenth century, trading networks became increasingly global. For instance the hunger in Great Britain and its former colonial US holdings for goods like spices, tea, and silks, not to mention opium, strengthened trade with China. Since trade in enslaved Africans had been forced underground with Spanish and British efforts to abolish it, the cost of enslaved Africans became prohibitive, and Cuban planters sought alternative labor forces. After China’s defeat in the Opium Wars of 1839–60, their needs were met when the Qing Dynasty was forced to pay concessions by


allowing Chinese “coolie” laborers to be transported to the West to work. Lisa Yun and Ricardo René Laremont write, moreover, that while “this labor-acquisition venture originated in Cuba, supplemental financing came from a multinational network of banks and firms obtained in New York, Boston, London, Paris, Amsterdam, and Liverpool.”

The history of Cuba as a history of sugar has been of fundamental importance to Campos-Pons’s artistic development. She began working with sugar in the 1990s as a way to honor her family’s history and memory, but in Alchemy of the Soul, Elixir for the Spirits she added rum to the mix. Furthermore, there is no question that Campos-Pons’s work, like her sense of self, is powerfully grounded in the lessons of Cuba’s plantation past. Her hometown of La Vega in Matanzas province was right at the epicenter of Cuba’s plantation sugar economy during the period in question. I propose, however, that at the PEM Campos-Pons invited viewers in New England, a region with important yet often unrecognized ties to Cuba and to the slave trade, to meditate not just on the contemporary echoes of Cuba’s plantation history but also on how the historical legacies of plantation slavery continue to impact black bodies—not just then and there, but now and here.

Curated by Joshua Basseches, then deputy director and chief curator at the PEM, Alchemy of the Soul, Elixir for the Spirits was on view from January to April 2016. While the installation was not conceived by Basseches as site specific (indeed, he hoped that it might travel), Campos-Pons nevertheless activated the PEM as a “functional site,” calling forth what James Meyer has described as a relationship between “institutional and textual filiations and the bodies that move between them (the artist’s above all).” As such, the historical and political implications of the triangle trade were localized by the installation’s siting at the PEM in Salem. Art historian Kellie Jones explains that one of installation art’s innovations is “its activation of ‘place,’ on both the cerebral and corporeal planes, [as] an activation of context. . . . Through installation, artists . . . create a space of intentionality.”

In what follows, I aim to elucidate how Alchemy of the Soul, Elixir for the Spirits engaged the “discursive sites” that have become central to Campos-Pons’s nearly thirty-year career as an artist. These include black diasporic memory (which for Campos-Pons, as an exile, emphasizes memories of and ties to family, and the deep presence of Africa in La Vega), migration, forced displacement through the Middle Passage but also contemporary political exile, transatlantic and global trade, enslaved and indentured labor, double consciousness, and the Cuban nationalist formulation of mestizaje (ethno-racial mixing) as discourse and ideology and its elaboration at midcentury as transculturation. The project’s relationship to these discursive sites and its activation of place and context was most intense when Campos-Pons staged a performance, called Agridulce, at the museum.

Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons was born in 1959. Her childhood home was a former slave barracks once occupied by her ancestors, including her enslaved Nigerian great-great-grandfather, who was brought to Cuba in the 1830s. As a child growing up, she knew local villagers who called her “child of the land.” By her great-great-grandfather, who was brought to Cuba in the 1830s, Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons was born in 1959. Her childhood home was a former slave barracks once occupied by her ancestors, including her enslaved Nigerian great-great-grandfather, who was brought to Cuba in the 1830s. As a child growing up, she knew local villagers who called her “child of the land.”

15. Basseches is now director and CEO of the Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto.
had once been enslaved. The artist also descends from indentured Chinese laborers brought to the island in the nineteenth century to supplement enslaved black labor, particularly on the sugar plantations. In the last decade, she has created work exploring that heritage alongside her African diasporic identity by incorporating cultural elements like porcelain vases, brush painting, calligraphy, and Chinese costume. As Heather Shirey observes, Campos-Pons’s engagement with her Chinese heritage, which she traces to a great-great grandmother, probes “larger questions about identity and transnationalism in the Black Atlantic world.”

Campos-Pons benefited from the educational policies put in place by Fidel Castro. Her artistic talent was recognized early, and she left La Vega during adolescence to attend art school in Havana. She completed her education with graduate studies at Cuba’s Instituto Superior de Arte (ISA) between 1980 and 1985. While she was still in Cuba, her work was informed by a burgeoning third world feminist sensibility—it thematized the subjection of both women and black Cubans under the revolutionary state. Notwithstanding official claims that racism was “legislated out” in revolutionary Cuba, she recounts that throughout her life she encountered many incidents of racism. As a highly educated black Cuban, Campos-Pons recounts that she was perceived as a contradiction by her white peers in Havana’s art world. She experienced an acute sense of double consciousness as well as the problem of Cuba’s “double morality” wherein white Cubans disdain Afro-Cuban traditions yet “cash in” on their importance to Cuban culture. Despite the fact that many black Cubans after the revolution continued to feel a sense of internalized shame regarding their past as descendants of enslaved people and the continuity of practices like Lucumi, Campos-Pons has observed that at the same time the sense of “being African” was profound: “In my country, in my setting, in my town, the ‘problem’ of being African wasn’t about physical placement or about land. When we talked about Africa, we . . . didn’t talk about the continent. . . . Nigeria was in my backyard. . . . Africa was there [in Cuba]. . . . The center of my ancestors wasn’t focused on displacement the way that it is in the United States. . . . I didn’t have to dig deep to find my past.”

Campos-Pons’s attainment of artistic maturity before departing Cuba in 1988 situates her work in relation to her Cuban contemporaries, including artists of the Grupo Antillano and the Volumen Uno generation, many of whom achieved recognition for engaging with the “importance of Africa and Afro-Caribbean influences in the formation of the Cuban nation,” drawing inspiration for example from Afro-Cuban Lucumi or Santería rituals, and thematizing Cuban anti-blackness, which they explored in conceptually innovative installations, performances, process art, neo-expressionist painting, and photography. Campos-Pons’s earliest works in the United States set her in dialogue with artists across the international scene as well, for example the BLK Art Group in Britain and in the United States, and artists such as Fred Wilson, Lorna Simpson, Renée Stout, Carrie Mae Weems, and Kara Walker, all of whom were expressing black consciousness through a resolutely contemporary aesthetic sensibility. Campos-Pons first encountered Weems’s work in 1988 in

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Boston: Weems was an artist in residence at the Massachusetts College of Art, where Campos-Pons was enrolled through an exchange program. It was after Campos-Pons's permanent move to Boston in 1991 that she merged a conceptual approach inflected by contemporary black subjectivity with memories of family and of Africa in Cuba. She had recently married Neil Leonard, a musician and experimental composer with whom she frequently collaborates, in Cuba, but they settled in Boston. Tightening US sanctions against Cuba in 1992 turned her emigration into an eleven-year self-exile. Thus alongside art-world peers who similarly engaged with the wider Black Atlantic, Campos-Pons has long engaged with memory, displacement, and exile as well as the material existence of the black body.

In his perceptive writing on her work, Okwui Enwezor has discussed Campos-Pons’s “cross-cultural poetics,” her “exploration of the multiplicities that exist between DuBoisian double consciousness and the radicalness of Caribbean Créolité.” Enwezor observes that “today . . . double consciousness is not solely resonant as a theory of the duality of in-betweeness. . . . It also enunciates the discontinuities in contemporary cultural identities: the feeling of being torn between cultures.” Thus, Campos-Pons’s work “and the diasporic imaginary under which its critical power is most revealed should be understood beyond the Cuban cultural context.” It is my aim here to do just that.

In her work in installation, photographic self-portraiture, painting, and especially performance, Campos-Pons has explored the various identities that comprise her subjectivity: Cuban, Yoruba, black, Chinese, feminist, exile. Yet her work goes beyond any of these for their own sake (“identity politics”) to examine these identities-in-politics. Through her work, Campos-Pons invites us to consider how identities are imbricated with structures and historical processes like colonialism, enslavement, and patriarchy, and how they are self-made as modalities that resist structures of oppression. Her work illuminates how “identities-in-politics” as embodied go beyond emancipation to create structures of liberation.

In what follows, I consider the discursive sites of Alchemy of the Soul, Elixir for the Spirits—namely the transatlantic triangle trade, Cuba’s sugar plantation economy and culture, and New England’s history in relation to both, especially insofar as it was engaged or not by the PEM. I argue that Alchemy of the Soul, Elixir for the Spirits addressed both the pain of plantation slavery in Cuba and Campos-Pons’s understanding of the power of “blackness across nations.” What remains is divided into three parts: “Race and Sugar,” “Sugar and Rum,” and “Bridging Cuba and Salem.” Taking a cue from Enwezor, I ask how Campos-Pons’s identity as a black US-based artist, who has lived in Boston for nearly thirty years, might have inflected her conceptualization of Alchemy of the Soul, Elixir for the Spirits. That is to say, I am interested not just in how this work thematized “Cuba’s past and present,” to which visitors were oriented by the exhibition’s interpretive wall labels, but rather how New England’s own historical relationship to the triangle trade might have figured in the inspiration, conceptualization, and articulation of the installation, and especially her performance at the museum.

Curatorial-statement/: Campos-Pons’s work with sugar has been by comparison both more personal and more subtle.

18. Freiman, Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons, 30.

23. This essay originated as a presentation at the College Art Association annual conference in February 2018; here I invoke the panel title given by Julie McGee, inviting a consideration of black expat artists and how the expat experience reveals “ inconsistent freedom narratives” both abroad but also “at home.”
I also ask how New England’s freedom narratives, whereby racism and racial capitalism are always “elsewhere,” may have shaped how Alchemy of the Soul, Elixir for the Spirits was presented to the public by the museum, and conversely how Campos-Pons’s strategic use of performance intervened in the museum’s interpretive narratives about Cuban plantation slavery and her work. I thus consider the interpretive conditions that obfuscate one archive—that of slavery in and New England—and prioritize another—that of slavery in Cuba—and examine how the artist used her body to disrupt both perceptions about her own narrative restraint as well as the institution’s framing of her body.

RACE AND SUGAR
Alchemy of the Soul, Elixir for the Spirits extended Campos-Pons’s career-long series of installations exploring her family’s history in relation Cuba’s sugar economy. She began this body of work in the early 1990s with History of a People Who Were Not Heroes in order to express the “dignity, presence, and integrity” of Africans brought to Cuba as slaves and to connect their history to the island’s.34 As Lisa Freiman has discussed, in these projects Campos-Pons explores the hardships of life and labor under plantation slavery as well as freedoms foreclosed under post-emancipation servitude.35 The series also commemorates the contributions of enslaved and free blacks to Cuba’s culture and economy.36 The first installation in the series, A Town Portrait (1994), activated Matanzas’s history by interpreting the town’s architectural landmarks. Spoken Softly with Maman (1998) focused on the women in her family, and specifically on the invisibility of their labor within a social system entirely structured around white elite privilege. The third chapter in the series now includes several installations, each employing sugar as a material metaphor for the legacies of enslavement because, she says, “azúcar” was what this town produced, because azúcar [squeezed] the blood of my whole family. . . . It is what defines Cuba.37 As she started it, Campos-Pons described it as self-portrait about looking at Cuban history from the outside.38 The first work to focus on sugar, Meanwhile the Girls Were Playing (1999), involved metaphoric portraits of the artist and her sisters, Amparo and Marta. A video projection showed Campos-Pons’s hands kneading colorful cotton candy and stirring a lump of sugar in a delicate etched glass full of water. She has recalled that when her mother gave her sugar water as a child, she would cry; she dislikes sugar and is often quoted as saying, “Sugar makes me cry. And the tears are salty and bitter.”39

Campos-Pons resumed working with sugar in 2010 when the Smith College Museum of Art commissioned Sugar/Bittersweet (Figures 2 and 3). There she employed abstraction to evoke a sugar cane field. Disks of cast glass and hand-formed raw sugar were pierced by African spears as a visual metaphor for the structures of oppression and grueling labor that sustained sugar production. The threaded spears were set atop Central and West African stools, alluding to the complicity of African royals in the slave trade.40 Her inclusion, as well, of Chinese stools made reference to the influx of so-called coolie laborers who although “defined by law as free and classified as white . . . identified themselves as unfree, exploited members of a race-based society.”41

The glass disks ranged in color from white to yellowish green to dark brown, along with balls of medium-brown panela sugar. In the installation, the color palette was suggestive of the process of refining sugar, but also evoked the gradations of Cuban colorism.42 In a video interview, Campos-Pons elaborates that she chose very fine sugar to evoke whiteness; the yellowish green, she says, “we call it la

35. Freiman, María Magdalena Campos-Pons, 44–50.
36. The series may have been inspired by the collected essays of Pedro Deschamps Chapeaux and Juan Pérez de la Riva focused on the contributions of free blacks and of indentured Chinese laborers working in Cuba’s sugar factories to Havana’s economy in the nineteenth century. Pedro Deschamps Chapeaux and Juan Pérez de la Riva, Contribución a la historia de la gente sin historia (Havana: Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, 1974). I am grateful to an anonymous reader for bringing this source to my attention.

FIGURE 3. Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons in her studio, summer 2010. Photo: Carolyn Eckert.
mulata"; the brown, real sugar, is the sugar people love to
eat and cook with; and the dark, molasses-colored brown
is like the sugar fed to animals. Her aim was to evoke
Cuba as "a nation of different people of lighter and darker
skin" while simultaneously alluding to endemic social ine-
quities and the popular conception that black Cubans are
like "darker sugar, less refined." The history of violence
behind the slave trade and its legacy in Cuban colorism was
suggested by the spears piercing the colored disks, the mul-
tiplicity and repetitive spatial arrangement of the threaded
disks, and their sorting by color, all expressive of an "ac-
accumulation of sorrow and pain."45

Sugar/Bittersweet also referred to the ways that Cuban
colorism has been rationalized through a nationalist dis-
course of mestizaje. The term can be translated as racial
mixing, miscegenation, creolization, amalgamation, and/
or transculturation. In the English language, the concept
carries an implicit threat of racial degeneration. But in
Cuba and generally throughout Latin America, mestizaje
can mean the mixing of the European white and Indigenous
races, as in mestizo/a; meanwhile mulatx/e refers to the
mixing of the white and black races to produce a mulata/o.
Mestizaje in particular has been elaborated by some Latin
American intellectual elites so as to formulate nationalist
ideologies of multiculturalism that purport to celebrate
racial diversity. More often than not, however, the concept
has been deployed to champion the productive possibilities
of ethno-racial mixing for the so-called improvement of
racial "others" (Indigenous, black, Asian) through blan-
queamiento (whitening), and for mixing’s potential to cull
acceptable attributes from racial others in order to acclima-
tize, even fortify, the white (colonizing) race.48

In the Cuban context, José Martí popularized the idea of
nuestra América mestiza in 1891, suggesting that through
racial mixture national unity could be achieved. He even
argued that "racial hate" could be eliminated since races
would be no more. However, as Vera Kurzinski has argued,
these "high-minded, well-intentioned words [were] designed to soften the racial differences and conflicts that
threatened to divide Cuba and other budding Hispanic
American nations." To make such claims "in a country
where slavery had not been officially abolished until 1886
is ... at best problematic, at worst hypocritical." Nevertheless
by the early twentieth century, "cubanidad and cubania
(which designate different versions of, or approaches to, Cubannness) were ... synonymous to mestizaje."49

In 1940, anthropologist and student of Afro-Cuban cul-
ture Fernando Ortiz elaborated his own theory of mestizaje
in the book Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar. There
he introduced the term "transculturation" to describe the
"antiphonal" and "contrapuntal" "transmutations" in Cuba
cultural objects and practices. Transculturation was,
Ortiz wrote, a corrective to acculturation in that it
accounted for the back-and-forth process of interchange
between one culture and another (in the Cuban context,
primarily European and African cultures). Ortiz also
acknowledged contributions to Cuban culture of the
"Neolithic Indian," but he accounted for "his" disappear-
ance by noting "his inability to adjust himself to the culture
brought in by the Spaniards." While Ortiz claimed to
ground his theory of transculturation in a process of cul-
tural rather than explicitly biological exchange, he famously
allegorized Cuba’s principal plantation exports, tobacco
and sugar, as male and female. Tobacco and sugar’s impor-
tance to Cuba’s preeminence in global trade gave rise, Ortiz
wrote, "to a steady human stream." In addition to enslaved
blacks from various regions of the African continent whose
cultures were "destroyed and crushed under the weight of
the cultures in existence here, like sugar cane ground in the
rollers of a mill," there came to colonial Cuba white
European “immigrants” as well as “[enslaved] Indians from

43. "María Magdalena Campos-Pons on Sugar/Bittersweet," Smith
45. "María Magdalena Campos-Pons on Sugar/Bittersweet," Smith
46. Creolization connotes mixture in some contexts, for instance the
United States and the Caribbean, but not Mexico, where criollo refers to a
Mexican-born white person.
47. See the Oxford English Dictionary, 2nd ed. (1989); Kurzinski, Sugar’s
Secrets, 4–5.
48. See for example José Vasconcelos’s discussion of mestizaje in La raza
cósima / The Cosmic Race, trans. Didier T. Jáen (1925; repr., Baltimore: Johns
Hopkins University Press, 1997). On the implications of this discourse in
Latin American eugenic movements see Nancy Leys Stepan, “The Hour of
Eugenics”; Race, Gender, and Nation in Latin America (Ithaca, NY: Cornell
University Press, 1991). Critical reformulations of mestizaje are elaborated in

Rafael Pérez-Torres, Mestizaje: Critical Uses of Race in Chicano Culture
(Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006); Alicia Arrízón,
Queering Mestizaje: Transculturation and Performance (Ann Arbor:
University of Michigan Press, 2006).
49. Kurzinski, Sugar’s Secrets, 5–7 (the quotes from Martí are from there
as well).
50. Fernando Ortiz, Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar, trans.
the mainland, Jews, Portuguese, Anglo-Saxons, French, North Americans, and even yellow Mongoloids from [China]. . . . Each torn from his native moorings was faced with the problem of disajustment and readjustment, of deculturation and acculturation—in a word, of transculturation.” Thus, the “real history of Cuba . . . is the history of its intermeshed transculturations.”55

Ortiz elaborated his theory of transculturation in highly raced and gendered terms—“Don Tabaco” (black manhood) and “Doña Azúcar” (mulatta womanhood)—an allegory that betrays the white, elite, male privilege of his day.52 He may have granted racial stereotypes high symbolic visibility within his articulation of cubanidad (Cuban national identity) but he did so with minimal concern for real social visibility, or the experiences and agency of raced persons. For example, “Tobacco,” Ortiz wrote, “is dark, ranging from black to mulatto; sugar is light, ranging from mulatto to white. Tobacco does not change its color; it is born dark and dies the color of its race,” and aside from the drying process it is consumed “pure.” (It is noteworthy that in Spanish the word for cigar is puro.) Despite its worldwide popularity, however, tobacco is considered “a snare of the devil, sinful and dangerous.”53 Meanwhile, over her lifetime, Doña Azúcar “whitened herself” (nace parda y se blanquea). She is “like a slave,” he wrote, “born without family name . . . name of hate or love. Sugar dies as [she] born and lives, anonymously; as though [she] were ashamed of having no name.” She is cane, cane juice, cane syrup, then sugar [caña . . . guarapo . . . meladura . . . azúcar].”54 For Ortiz, tobacco’s stasis and sugar’s intrinsic capacity to permutate were equivalent to black manhood and mulatta womanhood. Notwithstanding, Ortiz has earned praise for his theory of transculturation, which along with his concept of the ajíaco or stew (as opposed to the melting pot) has been taken up by subsequent generations of scholars to elaborate on the “contrapuntal,” “translational poetics,” and “super-syncretic” character of Cuban culture and modernity.55

As Jafari S. Allen argues, however, Ortiz’s theory of transculturation is “another theory of mestizaje” that ultimately “reinscribes the discursive death of blackness.” His allegory of tobacco and sugar has been used to whitewash social and economic structures, and colonial and then national ideologies, that gave little heed to the “racial/sexual terror” that underwent them. Allen argues that the “prophetic hope” for unity, fusion, synthesis, et cetera, expressed from Martí to Ortiz and beyond ultimately seeks the production and maintenance of more “whitenesses” and of masculinity.56 As Campos-Pons herself has explained, Cuba’s racial hierarchy is as yet undone.57 Yet while she herself has invoked Ortiz’s theory as generative for her work, her articulation of sugar’s legacy is suggestive nonetheless of how nationalist ideologies are compensatory “racializing assemblages” that obscure the history and legacies of bodily and psychic violence, racial and sexual terror, and black social death, while seeming to celebrate difference.58

**SUGAR AND RUM**

*Alchemy of the Soul, Elixir for the Spirits* renewed Campos-Pons’s engagement with sugar as a material signifier of the organizing logic of colonial power and violence. Its focus on the transformation of sugar into rum added another level of complexity to her creative engagement with the history and discourse of sugar in Cuba. By establishing a

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51. Ortiz, *Cuban Counterpoint*, 98.
52. Ortiz, *Cuban Counterpoint*, chapter 1.
53. Ortiz, *Cuban Counterpoint*, 9, 10.
54. Ortiz, *Cuban Counterpoint*, 9, 42. In the original Spanish it is clear that sugar is gendered female. The 1995 English translation published by Duke University Press is somewhat more ambiguous, translating “she” as “it” and thus exacerbating women’s social invisibility. See Fernando Ortiz, *Contrapunto cubano del tabaco y el azúcar* (Havana: Pensamiento Cubano / Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, 1983), 16.
formal dialogue with *Sugar/Bittersweet*, this new installation alluded to Campos-Pons’s prior critical reframing of *mestizaje* and transculturation as processes and discourses born of violence. Her engagement with the transformation of sugar into rum invoked Ortiz’s theory of transculturation by alluding to the “back and forth” of sugar and rum and of Cuba and New England.\(^\text{59}\) *Alchemy of the Soul, Elixir for the Spirits* underscored the interdependence of a burgeoning global economy that through interlocking “triangular” trade patterns connected West Africa not just with the artist’s ancestral home in Cuba’s Matanzas province, but with New England’s own merchant elite. Campos-Pons had already noted the Cuba–New England connection in an interview in 2011: “I heard that the cobblestones in Matanzas and in parts of Havana come from New England. And of course, historically Cuba’s trade with New England involved sugar. . . . Massachusets and Rhode Island have been complicit in the sugar trade and triangle for hundreds of years, and they have a direct link to Matanzas.”\(^\text{60}\)

*Alchemy of the Soul, Elixir for the Spirits* was the fifth and largest yet of Campos-Pons’s cycle of sugar works.\(^\text{61}\) In one press review, the artist was quoted as saying that she had dreamed about this project for nearly thirty years.\(^\text{62}\) The project occupied several spaces at the PEM. Visitors entered on the first floor, passing through a large sugar pine post-and-beam structure representing the form of an abandoned sugar mill. A sign mounted on the structure directed them to a freight elevator loaded with burlap sacks labeled with the names of Cuban sugar refineries. Alongside the sacks, a vintage turntable was set atop a wooden crate (Figures 4 and 5).

As the elevator made its ascent to the third-floor galleries, the turntable played the first of two sound installations by Neil Leonard. The sonic composition, titled *Cantos del Muelle—Songs of the Docks*, featured Rafael Navarro Pujada, a renowned Afro-Cuban rumba musician from Matanzas, singing a cappella. In her essay in the accompanying exhibition catalogue, Nancy Pick noted that Cuban rumba “grew out of slavery and hardship” and described Leonard’s use of four songs by Navarro Pujada as a “bridge” to Campos-Pons’s youth. The elevator ride, which lasted longer than a minute, served to “symbolically ferry museum visitors to and from Cuba.”\(^\text{63}\) Upon exiting the elevator one would pass into a vestibule connecting the two spaces, the Barton and House Galleries, where *Alchemy of the Soul, Elixir for the Spirits* was installed. Opposite the elevator an introductory wall panel stated:

Campos-Pons . . . is an alchemist. . . . Over the past thirty years, the Cuban-born artist has transformed personal and cultural histories into art works, capturing and transmuting injustices into objects of

\(^{59}\) Ortiz’s relevance to the installation is noted in Esther Allen, “Constellations in Sugar,” in *Alchemy of the Soul: María Magdalena Campos-Pons*, 85.

\(^{60}\) Muehlig, “Sugar Makes Me Cry,” 33.

\(^{61}\) In terms of overall square footage and the scale and variety of individual elements, according to Basseches, “Transforming Pain into Beauty,” 15.


\(^{63}\) Nancy Pick, “Cuba Distilled: Bringing Sound to *Alchemy of the Soul*,” in *Alchemy of the Soul: María Magdalena Campos-Pons*, 74.
beauty and lyricism. In this exhibition, Campos-Pons evokes her childhood memories of Cuba just as a new era is dawning for the island nation and for the future of her work. 64

These and other statements presented throughout the exhibition spaces framed the installation as transporting visitors to a Cuba of the past, marked by the violence of plantation slavery, but also the Cuba of today, which in 2015 appeared on the verge of resuming normalized relations with the United States. The label then stated: “In this installation, we encounter a series of forms seemingly in the process of changing shape—from industrial to organic and abstract. Alchemy of the Soul provokes questions relevant to us all: How do we experience the effects of history as individuals and as cultural communities?”

64. I am grateful to the PEM staff for providing me with wall label texts and also to Joshua Basseches for speaking with me about the conception and execution of the project.

In the Barton Gallery were arrayed five sculptures of blown glass and resin, supported by light-gauge steel frame armatures (see Figure 1). The sculptures ranged in color from a dark, almost purplish brown to a translucent dark bottle green, transparent golden yellow, and opaque pinkish beige. The colors alluded, as in Sugar/Bittersweet, to the process of refining sugar and to the long, fraught history of Cuban colorism, both as lived experience and as cultural discourse.

The sculptures’ rounded and elliptical bulbous glass elements were connected by long, extruded glass tubes. Campos-Pons’s installations often include more hand-hewn elements, but here the sculptures were sleeker and more industrial-looking, evoking the ruined structures of Cuban sugar refineries and the connected pots and columns of a rum distillery. The tallest unit in the gallery, the dark purplish brown and bottle-green sculpture, evoked the succession, called a “train” (tren), of boilers in a casa de caldera (boiling house of a refinery) where cane juice was...
heated to dangerously high temperatures, a process requiring great precision, usually performed by the most skilled male slaves and laborers, known as *maestros de azúcar.* Fittingly, one element of the bottle-green sculpture, a piece of flat cut glass, evoked the scalding steam emitted from the boilers. The color of the sculptures also anthropomorphized them, evoking the very laborers tasked with the dangerous work.

Just as the two tallest units evoked the bodies of the *maestros de azúcar,* the translucent yellow and pinkish beige units, with their swelling, rounded elements, possessed anthropomorphic qualities as well. Certainly they could be said to evoke the women who labored on the plantations and in the *ingenios,* but another interpretation is possible: namely, the ubiquitous association in Cuban visual and popular culture between gradations of sugar and the image of the *mulata* popularized in the nineteenth century, for example by *marquillas cigarreras,* illustrated wrappers used to market cigarettes from the 1860s to about 1890. *Marquillas cigarreras* offered cigarette consumers scenes of everyday life that were intended to be humorous entertainments, embellished with ornamental borders and whimsical captions. Ortiz’s aforementioned association of tobacco and sugar was underscored in the *marquillas* by the fact that the illustrated scenes depicted not just tobacco plantations, but also sugar *ingenios,* for example detailed views of *casas de caldera.*

E. Carmen Ramos and Alison Fraunhar have persuasively demonstrated the associations between sugar, race, class, and female sexuality in the imagery of a series of *marquillas* produced in the 1860s for the Eduardo Guillo cigarette factory’s brand “Para Usted.” The title of the series was *Muestras de azúcar de mi ingenio* (Sugar Samples from My Refinery). While the captions employ terms used to refer to gradations of sugar, the illustrations depict *mulatas* of different “degrees” of *blanqueamiento,* with the most “refined” labeled *Blanco de primera,* followed by *Blanco de segunda,* the less refined *Quebrado de primera* and *Quebrado de segunda,* concluding with *Cucurucho,* a term referring to dark-colored sugar as well as a popular Cuban candy incorporating other ingredients like coconut or guava with brown sugar. To the modern eye, the illustrations are offensively stereotypical insofar as the *mulatas* with lighter skin are depicted as coy and flirtatious while the darker women are treated in a brutalized manner, with exaggerated racialized facial features. Given the association in Cuba of gradations of sugar with gradations of racial whitening, and how these were imposed onto the bodies of mixed-race women as receptacles of social meaning, I suggest (acknowledging the risk of an overly literal interpretation) that the yellow and pinkish beige sculptures Campos-Pons created for *Alchemy of the Soul, Elixir for the Spirits* might be interpreted as evoking the racial trauma of this system of gendered bodily signification.

The last of the five units, set against one wall, was filled with amber liquid that flowed through tubing, bubbled, and pooled in clear bowls, giving off the sweet scent of rum (Figure 6). Walking among the sculptures, visitors experienced the second of Neil Leonard’s sonic installations. The sound of real liquid coming from the fifth sculpture was accompanied by gurgling sounds and swelling vocal emissions from speakers around the room. These evoked the pouring of rum, a precious “elixir” and the culmination of the histories and arduous processes evoked by the sculptures arrayed. Spotlights shining from the gallery ceiling created dappled pools of reflected color and interlocking shadows on the bare, beige walls and light-colored floors and evoked the dense stalks of a sugar cane field. The effect of sound and smell surrounding the minimal installation of abstract yet anthropomorphic sculptures was haunting. It enticed, yet was laden with the tragic historical circumstances that made turning sugar into rum possible.


67. E. Carmen Ramos and Alison Fraunhar have persuasively demonstrated the associations between sugar, race, class, and female sexuality in the imagery of a series of *marquillas* produced in the 1860s for the Eduardo Guillo cigarette factory’s brand “Para Usted.” The title of the series was *Muestras de azúcar de mi ingenio* (Sugar Samples from My Refinery). While the captions employ terms used to refer to gradations of sugar, the illustrations depict *mulatas* of different “degrees” of *blanqueamiento,* with the most “refined” labeled *Blanco de primera,* followed by *Blanco de segunda,* the less refined *Quebrado de primera* and *Quebrado de segunda,* concluding with *Cucurucho,* a term referring to dark-colored sugar as well as a popular Cuban candy incorporating other ingredients like coconut or guava with brown sugar. To the modern eye, the illustrations are offensively stereotypical insofar as the *mulatas* with lighter skin are depicted as coy and flirtatious while the darker women are treated in a brutalized manner, with exaggerated racialized facial features. Given the association in Cuba of gradations of sugar with gradations of racial whitening, and how these were imposed onto the bodies of mixed-race women as receptacles of social meaning, I suggest (acknowledging the risk of an overly literal interpretation) that the yellow and pinkish beige sculptures Campos-Pons created for *Alchemy of the Soul, Elixir for the Spirits* might be interpreted as evoking the racial trauma of this system of gendered bodily signification.

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68. The term *quebrado,* meaning “broken,” was employed to refer to sugar with a light yellow hue. See Ramos-Alfred, “A Painter of Cuban Life,” 125, 141–43; Fraunhar, *Mulata Nation.* 61. Ramos-Alfred also discusses a related series of images produced by the artist Victor Patricio de Landaluze (113–15).

69. See for example the *marquillas* illustrated in Núñez Jiménez, *Cuba en las marquillas cigarreras del siglo XIX*, 78–81.

Blackness Distilled, Sugar and Rum 21
In an alcove of the Barton Gallery a split-screen video showed scenes of Campos-Pons’s first visit to La Vega in thirty years. Walking amid banana plants and the ruins of two sugar refineries, she encounters cousins and former neighbors. In one scene she stops in front of the former slave barracks where she was born and where her ancestors lived. At another point, seated with a refinery behind her, she describes *Alchemy of the Soul, Elixir for the Spirits*:

The piece . . . is a continuation of the work I started in 1993, capturing and collecting, in metaphorical ways, the history of sugar production. . . . I am trying to capture . . . the ghost, the ruin, what is left of [the] industry that at one time flourished and now is . . . dismantled. In some way this space still has a bit of that soul, of that energy. So many things have been transformed here, and so many things . . . stay the same, from the sugar fields that are surround[ing] this red soil that I am standing [on] now . . . to the rum that I am trying to convey in the piece now, the core, the essence, stays there, the same way that when I am here, I feel like . . . the core of my own identity stays the same, I am a guajira, yo soy una campesina, my feet are red forever because I was born here. 70

Her words seem to express both longing for home and the bitterness of sugar. Her interactions with family and friends are easy and affectionate, but her words bear witness to the past.

In the House Gallery, visitors encountered a series of works dating to 2008, the period just after the artist was first able to return to Cuba following thawed US-Cuban relations. Among two paintings and three of the artist’s well-known Polaroid grid self-portraits was a sixth sculpture, this one made of transparent cobalt-blue glass (Figure 7). This was the first sculpture created for the PEM exhibition and the one most closely expressive of the

70. The video is reposted at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MULRM3OHid8.
concept of alchemy. It was inspired by the lasting impression of Campos-Pons’s first encounter, in Boston in 1988, with a reproduction of Remedios Varo’s painting *The Creation of Birds* (1957). Nearby, in a second video, Campos-Pons describes the painting as

almost like a *performative* piece [of] birds . . . being painted. The primary colors are dripping down onto a palette from [a] form . . . that I totally fell in love with. I remember seeing that piece and thinking “alchemy.” And I wrote to myself, if this could be made of glass . . . . There is a very strong connection between memory and glass. There is something about them that both of them are resilient. . . . Memory and fragility, memory and resilience. I have been very concerned about justice—about what it means to be part of society or a place in which justice and equality is taken into account. Labor has been very important in my work. Who made the labor. What is was for. How it came to be. Memory. Who of my family and my relatives came to this part of the world? And why? And how? Exile. . . . Displacement. . . . What is the materiality of all this?71

BRIDGING CUBA AND SALEM

Campos-Pons’s statements about the performativity of Varo’s depiction of creativity, and about justice and labor, invite consideration insofar as she flags these as among her conceptual anchors. In the exhibition catalogue she is quoted as saying that in Matanzas, Rafael Navarro Pujada, the singer whose vocalizations filled the freight elevator, worked by day on the docks, loading sacks of sugar onto ships bound for Boston harbor. “Here in Boston,” she says, “you eat the sugar, you drink the rum, but you never hear the voices of the people who produced them. When you put his voice in an elevator in Salem, it’s a beautiful gesture of negotiation.”72 Campos-Pons’s statement is characteristic

71. This second video was on view in the House Gallery and is not available online.
of her commitment to expressing pain and anger with delicacy and nuance. The catalogue further quotes her: “You don’t need to say the hardest things in the loudest way,” an echo of her earlier assertion about the importance of silence in her performance practice.73 Yet Campos-Pons’s allusion to negotiation, coupled with her reference to Navarro Pujada’s unrecognized labor, is suggestive not just of cultural negotiation but of negotiation with unequal power relations. Her statement can be interpreted, moreover, as relating not just to the invisibility of the laboring bodies that make the sugar we consume so voraciously in the first world, but also our sometimes willful ignorance regarding structures of violence and injustice that compel certain bodies to labor. Her statements are likewise suggestive in regard to the discursive negotiation required of an artist whose work engages with the institution of slavery as a discursive site and also with a given institutional site, the PEM, the historical founding of which was implicated in the global economy of sugar and slavery in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

I return therefore to the PEM’s interpretive framing of Alchemy of the Soul, Elixir for the Spirits. After introducing Campos-Pons to museumgoers and framing her work and the project as “capturing and transmuting injustices into objects of beauty and lyricism,” the introductory wall panel asked, “How do we experience the effects of history as individuals and as cultural communities?” Such interpretive framing seems peculiarly elliptical and yet characteristically “New England.” That is to say, the interpretation, which was relatively minimal, appeared to locate the violence and injustice of the transatlantic trade system resolutely to objects of beauty and lyricism, the introductory wall panel asked, “How do we experience the effects of history as individuals and as cultural communities?” Such interpretive framing seems peculiarly elliptical and yet characteristically “New England.”

Historic New England’s connections with Cuba are an important source of inspiration for Alchemy of the Soul, Elixir for the Spirits. For over two centuries, ports throughout this region participated in trade with the Caribbean. Ships sailed out of Salem Harbor—beyond your view here—to the islands carrying local goods, such as salt cod, wood, and horses. They returned with sugar and molasses to sell on the New England market. At the time, molasses was a key ingredient in the production of rum at local distilleries. By the late eighteenth century, over fifty rum distilleries operated in Massachusetts and produced over two million gallons of alcohol per year. In Salem, distilleries dotted the waterfront and streets near the museum, and contributed to the greater Atlantic rum trade.

While the label acknowledged economies in relation, it did so in a rather self-congratulatory way, holding up New England’s own colonial and postindependence rum industry not as part of an entangled system of colonial violence but as evidence of the resourcefulness of Salem’s eighteenth- and nineteenth-century merchant class. Notably, it failed to explicitly name the Atlantic trade as a global capitalist economic system of interlocking triangles, each of which ultimately relied on forced labor, whether enslaved or indentured. After all, rum produced in New England was not just consumed here, it was also sent to West Africa, where it was exchanged for captives to produce more sugar, more rum, and more slaves. Further still, the capital earned from this trade fueled the East India trade in exotic luxury goods, and later may have served to indenture “coolie” laborers.

In her recent book New England Bound (2016), historian Wendy Warren calls New England the “Key of the Indies” and elaborates upon the importance of the Caribbean slave-based plantation economy to the New England economy. She explains that while enslaved blacks may not have been picking cotton in New England, through a triangular system of trade they consumed the salt cod shipped from New England to the West Indies. And enslaved blacks throughout the Caribbean made the molasses essential to the production of rum in both Cuba and New England. Warren also recounts that in 1638 the Salem-based ship Desire took captive Massachusetts Indians to the West Indies for sale as slaves, then returned to Salem with a cargo of tobacco, cotton, salt, and a number of enslaved black Africans who were sold in Boston.74 New England’s

involvement in human cargo had other permutations as well. In the 1850s, US merchant ships picked up coerced and kidnapped laborers in Chinese ports and shipped them to work on plantations in the Americas, as attested for example by the infamous case of the Boston-based Waverley, which saw an uprising of Chinese “coolies” during which hundreds died en route to Cuba. 75

Alchemy of the Soul, Elixir for the Spirits can be conceptualized as “completing” Campos-Pons’s sugar works insofar as it thematized not just that sugar was grown and refined in Cuba through the backbreaking labor of the artist’s enslaved and indentured ancestors, but that its transformation into rum was a process that occurred in both Cuba and New England. From the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries, Salem, Medford, and Boston in Massachusetts, along with Bristol and Newport in Rhode Island, maintaned thriving rum industries linked to varying degrees to the slave and “coolie” trade. While the relationship between Salem’s distilleries and the triangle trade was not explicitly addressed in the interpretive wall labels for Alchemy of the Soul, readers who visited the PEM’s website and online publication for the exhibition may have followed hyperlinks to a story by Georgetown University doctoral student Jordan Smith, a fellow at the PEM’s Phillips Library during the organization and planning phase of Alchemy of the Soul. In his blog post on the Phillips Library website, Smith discussed the rum industry in Salem, noting that his research had turned up receipts and letters document the importation of molasses from places including Suriname, Saint-Domingue (present-day Haiti), Demerera (present-day Guiana), and Cuba. 76 Smith also noted that the presence of free and enslaved black men as laborers in Salem’s distilleries is noted in archival records. Another link on the PEM’s website for Alchemy of the Soul shared with readers the discovery in the PEM’s historic collection of a jar of raw sugar from nineteenth-century Matanzas and a bottle of early nineteenth-century rum from New England (Figures 8 and 9). These objects were not on view in the galleries during the run of Alchemy of the Soul, having evidently been discovered only after the exhibition opened. 77 Nevertheless, the failure to explicitly recognize the “unfreedom” and the violence borne by Native, black, and Chinese bodies not just in Cuba but also in historical New England is entirely congruent with the narrative of Northern exceptionalism that celebrates settler resourcefulness and asserts the negligible role of slavery in the region. 78

...
Salem’s connection to Cuba was more explicit in the print catalogue and online e-book than in the interpretive gallery labels. In his catalogue essay, curator Joshua Basseches invoked Paul Gilroy’s formulation of the Black Atlantic as the arena of maritime commerce that linked New England, West Africa, and the Caribbean. There, Basseches acknowledged the full cycle of the trade pipeline and the fact that “the merchants and sea captains of New England were among those who became rich from the Triangle Trade”:

These historic linkages connecting Cuba and New England make the Salem-based PEM a particularly appropriate site to inaugurate *Alchemy of the Soul, Elixir for the Spirits*. Slaves did not represent a material part of the trade activities of the Salem merchants who founded the East India Marine Society in 1799 (later to be known as PEM); however, Salem merchants did play a role in the Triangle Trade pattern that supported the plantation system in Cuba, sending salt cod to the West Indies, shipping wooden staves to make the casks which transported molasses, providing horses used in sugar mills (like the one in La Vega), and, ultimately, establishing a prominent market for the sugar and molasses such mills produced.79

To be sure, by the time the PEM was founded in 1799, Massachusetts had ended its participation in the African slave trade (albeit not until 1788). Abolition in the state

was not formalized legally, however, until the US Congress passed the Thirteenth Amendment in 1865. As already noted, however, some New England merchants had, by the 1850s, replaced that involvement with the trade in Chinese "coolies."

Notwithstanding the information presented in the catalogue, the publicly available interpretive exhibition materials also left unexamined how the themes engaged by Campos-Pons—coloniality of race, labor, power—might shed light on the complex economic entanglements of the New England elites who founded the East India Marine Society in 1799 at the height of Salem's economic power as a trading port. Membership in the society was restricted to shipmasters and supercargoes (those who served on shipboard as proxies for the actual owners of goods for sale) who had rounded both the Cape of Good Hope and Cape Horn. These were Salem's most powerful mariners, many of whom had first acquired wealth by trading dried cod, corn, wood, horses, and rum for sugar, molasses, and enslaved Indians and Africans in the Caribbean, the Atlantic coast of South America, and Africa's west coast. Then as trade to China and Japan opened up, their wealth was magnified by the burgeoning global capitalism of the era. In 1825 the members gathered to inaugurate East India Marine Hall, the society's "cabinet of curiosities" and an expression of their ability to "possess the history of the world" through their maritime exploits. The lack of explicit connection to this history was all the more striking given that the PEM still proudly displays many of the historical objects collected throughout the Asian Pacific by the society's members.

In the foreword to the print catalogue, Dan L. Monroe, director and CEO of the PEM, and Trevor Smith, curator of the museum's contemporary art initiative "Present Tense," astutely described Campos-Pons's installation as "intensifying our precarious sense of how history, memories, dreams, and visions advance and recede in consciousness. . . . From a critical perspective, Campos-Pons is forward looking and speculative rather than analytical." These statements, along with the museum's commission of Campos-Pons, suggest an aim on the part of the PEM, and of course the artist herself, to take a productively dissonant rather than literal approach to the history of transatlantic trade and to the global history of seafaring and trade that enriched the Salem economy. Furthermore, Monroe and Smith acknowledge the value of working with contemporary artists, through the "Present Tense" initiative, to both "see ourselves and the museum's historical legacies through their eyes" and "engage the cultural challenges of our time in order to imagine alternative futures for ourselves." While acknowledging the historical and material connections between Salem and Cuba, Monroe and Smith characterize these as a "forgotten historical irony" and "serendipities that link the Peabody Essex Museum and Campos-Pons and Leonard." Their phrasing, in tandem with the interpretation offered museumgoers, is suggestive however of a reluctance to fully acknowledge that historical forgetting is more than ironic or serendipitous. Meanwhile, Campos-Pons's approach in *Alchemy of the Soul, Elixir for the Spirits* served to instantiate historical remembering. Her dissonant approach allowed silences to speak and refused to smooth over incommensurable knowledges.

Historical forgetting was evidently at play in some of the press reviews that underscored the exhibition's focus on Cuba's "dark sugar-filled past" and emphasized Campos-Pons's evocation of the "ruins left by the 1,000 or so sugar and rum factories that once flourished in Cuba."

48–69. The displays she critiques are not currently on view, as the East India Hall is being renovated.

86. Dan L. Monroe and Trevor Smith, "Foreword," in *Alchemy of the Soul: Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons,* 6 (print edition only).
87. Monroe and Smith, "Foreword," in *Alchemy of the Soul: Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons,* 7 (print edition only).
Such accounts were evidently unaware of the trade connections between Salem and Cuba that were discussed in the catalogue, or the recent in-depth historical studies of New England’s connections to the slave trade.90 More insightful reviewers noted, however, how the exhibition might provoke viewers to “search the complex history of labor, trade, currency, politics, and power that connect through the global history of the sugar industry.”91

That last comment suggests that public tolerance for a more historicized interpretive framing may have been higher than that offered by the museum signage. Done right, such a framing would not necessarily have diminished the evocative subtlety and minimalist aesthetic of Alchemy of the Soul, Elixir for the Spirits, nor would it have undermined Campos-Pons’s sophisticated refusal to render a literal or reductively transparent way the painful pasts of the transatlantic sugar and rum economy.92 Indeed, her palimpsest of objects, sound, smell, video, and two-dimensional works in photography and painting installed across various spaces throughout the PEM was consistent with the artist’s long-standing practice dating back at least to The Seven Powers Come by the Sea (1992), a project about the legacies of the Middle Passage exhibited at Boston’s Institute of Contemporary Art.93

Given the complex ways in which Campos-Pons’s Alchemy of the Soul, Elixir for the Spirits engaged the transatlantic history of sugar and rum, Salem and Cuba, the installation begged consideration of her point of departure as both a “Cuban artist in exile” and a black US-based artist whose discursive sites include both plantation-era Cuba and New England’s historical contribution to the Black Atlantic’s capitalist world-system.94 My interest in engaging Campos-Pons’s work in a conversation about black subjectivity in New England, as much as her Cuban exile status, was affirmed by the publication in December 2017 of the Boston Globe’s “spotlight” series “Boston. Racism. Image. Reality.” The series sprang partly from a national survey commissioned by the newspaper in fall 2017 that found that among eight major cities, black people ranked Boston as least welcoming to people of color; more than half (54 percent) rated it as unwelcoming.95 Reporters visited iconic locations—the seaport district, recently redeveloped at a cost of more than $18 billion in taxpayer investment; the Boston Red Sox’s Fenway Park and the New England Patriots’ Gillette Stadium; tony restaurants; the Museum of Fine Arts—and counted the number of black people they observed. The Globe reported that “on a sunny

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90. The studies include those noted above by Pope Melish, Warren, Desrochers, and Brown University’s Center for the Study of Slavery and Justice, or for example Craig Steven Wilder, Ebony and Ivy: Race, Slavery, and the Troubled History of America’s Universities (New York and London: Bloomsbury, 2015). See also the 2009 film (Traces of the Trade: A Story from the Deep North) and website (http://www.tracesofthetrade.org) developed by Katrina Browne, a documentary filmmaker who traced her own connections to the DeWolfe’s of Rhode Island, the largest slave-trading family in the United States.


93. See Finley, Committed to Memory. Campos-Pons’s approach to installation practice over the last twenty-five years sets her solidly among peers like Lorna Simpson, and although the relationship of Alchemy of the Soul, Elixir for the Spirits to its literal site, the PEM, is more oblique, the project brings to mind installations like Simpson’s Five Rooms (1991), one of several projects that thematized plantation slavery as part of Places with a Past, a site-specific contemporary art exhibition organized by Mary Jane Jacobs for the Spoleto Festival in Charleston, South Carolina, in 1991. See Copeland, Bound to Appear, 76–99.

94. See Gilroy, The Black Atlantic.

95. Boston Globe, “Boston. Racism. Image. Reality,” December 5, 2017, https://www.bostonglobe.com/metro/2017/12/05/boston-racism-image-reality/FFhux0Wv4kOeRlorBiDTy7K/story.html. The Globe reporting team gathered conventional statistics on the demographic representation and the experience of blacks in the city’s universities and health care institutions; urban growth and development; the business and political sectors; and championship sports. In a graph titled “Racial makeup of 10 largest metro areas,” by percent, the Globe reported that Boston is 73 percent white and 7 percent black; meanwhile, Philadelphia is 65 percent white and 20 percent black; New York is 48 percent white and 16 percent black; and Washington, DC, is 47 percent white and 25 percent black, http://apps.bostonglobe.com/spotlight/boston-racism-image-reality/series/image/. The US Census reports that the city of Boston is 52.8 percent white and 25.3 percent black; https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/bostoncitymassachusetts/PST045120/2017/000020?accessed May 22, 2018, and the city of Salem is 77.1 percent white and 5.8 percent black, https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/salemcitymassachusetts/PST045120 (accessed May 22, 2018).
Saturday in September, about 4 percent of the roughly 3,000 patrons counted entering the Museum of Fine Arts, one of the largest museums in the country, were black, and "of the 200 diners sipping cocktails and enjoying Thursday night dinner in October at Eastern Standard in Kenmore Square [in Cambridge], four were black." For many, the Globe’s revelation about the persistent experience of social isolation and racism in greater Boston was hardly news.

**AGRIDULCE: ON “KNOWING OTHERWISE”**

An informed visitor to *Alchemy of the Soul, Elixir for the Spirits*—one knowing that Massachusetts was the first slaveholding colony, or aware of the turn in historical studies of New England that account for the legacy of the slave trade in the region, or understanding ongoing racial inequalities in Boston and the greater New England region—might have intuited on her own how Campos-Pons’s distillation of sugar into rum as a metaphor for unfreedom engaged all of these histories and all of the aforementioned discursive sites. Such a viewer would have understood how *Alchemy of the Soul, Elixir for the Spirits* illuminated not just the trauma of racial and sexual terror in Cuba’s plantation history, but the complexity of black being and of black artistic agency on both sides of the Atlantic.

But what about visitors unaware of Salem’s or New England’s historical relationships to the transatlantic and East India trade, or unaware of the experience not just of Northern freedom but of Northern “unfreedom,” of the historical presence of enslaved black labor in New England? What about visitors who did not read the print catalogue, or access the online e-book? How might the curatorial or interpretive framework have rendered these histories, legacies, and relationships more readily available and pertinent?

What might such visitors have made of Campos-Pons’s performance at the PEM on the evening of January 21, 2016, during one of the museum’s late-night Third Thursdays? In the midst of an evening of art making, Cuban cuisine, and rum tasting, Campos-Pons staged a performance she called *Agridulce*, meaning “bittersweet,” in the museum’s atrium (Figure 10). Appearing in the guise of a nineteenth-century plantation slave, she wore a long dress with a full skirt of green fabric printed with a sugar cane pattern. Her hair was wrapped in a kerchief of the same fabric, and her face, hands, and bare feet were painted white. She began the performance on a bridge overlooking the atrium, where she hacked at a row of sugar cane. Descending to the atrium, she then walked among her audience, offering them fresh-cut cane: “Try it. It’s sweet.”

To be sure, the references conjured by *Agridulce* were many and complex, and its provocations multivalent. Her embodiment brought forth the specter of enslaved black women’s labor on Cuba’s sugar plantations. It also evoked Santería, or Lucumí ritual. In her analysis of Campos-Pons’s engagement with the Middle Passage in *The Seven Powers Come by the Sea*, Cheryl Finley writes that “The

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96. As the home of Harvard, MIT, and many other universities and colleges, Cambridge is reputed to be more diverse, but while the white population has a smaller majority share of the population at 66.9 percent, the Asian population is 15.7 percent and the black population is still only 10.8 percent, https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/cambridgecitymassachusetts/PST045218, (accessed January 22, 2019).

Afro-Caribbean religion Santería, with its blending of Yoruba and Roman Catholic traditions, has been a formative influence on the work of Campos-Pons, guiding the creation of the form and content as well as the bodily experience of the installation.” Finley observes that installation art “relies on an interactive form of place memory that summons the kinesthetic relationship of the viewer to the objects in the installation as well as the viewer’s experience of the installation environment.” But, she adds, it is “Santería’s hold on the body in ritual [that is] also integral to why Campos-Pons began to fold performance art into her installations.”

In *Agridulce*, the artist’s initial gesture was violent, followed by an invitation to the viewer to metaphorically consume the fruits of her labor. Action thus mirrored both the conceptual framework and viewer to metaphorically consume the fruits of her labor. Her wielding of the machete could also be interpreted as invoking the Lucumí warrior orisha (deity) Ogun. Like Ogun, Campos-Pons swung the machete to clear a metaphoric path to awareness and understanding.

The white paint on her face, hands, and feet likewise alluded to Lucumi practice and to the artist’s Chinese heritage. As elsewhere, it served both a protective and a purifying function. Heather Shirey has observed that the paint, similar to *cascarilla*, an eggshell-derived chalk (*efun*) used as body and face paint in Lucumi ritual, serves a “double purpose” for the artist. First, in its similarity to *cascarilla*, it references not only purification but “transformation and hybridity.” Second, as applied, the paint allows her dark skin to show through, challenging the “temptation to read the artist’s figure [or her ethno-racial identities] as static.” Campos-Pons has employed such paint in numerous works, including *When I Am Here/Estoy Allá* (1996), a series of color Polaroid self-portraits. In one iteration she wrote “Patria Una Trampa” (Nationality Is a Trap) in brown crayon across her breastbone and atop the chalky paint smeared over her face, chest, shoulders. In another version she wrote “Identity Could Be A Tragedy.” She has stated that the self-portraits express the idea of the “in-between—the interstitial space.”

In the more recent two-part series *My Mother Told Me I Am Chinese: Painting Lesson and China Porcelain: My Mother Told Me I Am Chinese* (2009), the white paint once more allows her dark skin to show through. In the video component of the latter Campos-Pons appears applying and removing a Yoruba Gelede mask and then repainting her face with *cascarilla*. She thus affirms both her African and her Chinese heritage. The same can be said for *Agridulce*.

On her use of performance, Campos-Pons has commented on the vulnerability of the body in “all its fragility . . . what it means to be there and breathing . . . I only do performance when there is an urgency to really be there myself.” The statement suggests how performance completes her installations, and calls to mind the ways that artists of color must negotiate the contexts within which their work is shown. Fundamentally, it was through her performance and her bodily presence in *Agridulce* that Campos-Pons brought the violence of transatlantic and global trade “home” to Salem, home to New England, and home, if you will, to the East India Marine Society’s cabinet of curiosities. The performance rendered transparent, if only momentarily, the more “opaque” installation of objects made of blown and cast colored glass, resin, steel, and rum essence on view in the galleries. While these objects exemplified a delicate, metaphoric, and decidedly nonconfrontational modality,


one suggestive of a desire to impede the viewer’s ability to know directly, quickly, or completely. Agridulce, by contrast, spectacularized the bitterness of sugar and slavery.

By performing at the PEM, in Salem, in the guise of a nineteenth-century enslaved woman, Campos-Pons pushed back against freedom narratives that conveniently conceptualize the painful pasts of the Black Atlantic as only “over there.” Agridulce confronted narratives that allow us to celebrate US exceptionalism over here. Even if only for one evening, Campos-Pons’s performance invited visitors to contemplate how her work “transmut[es] injustices into objects of beauty and lyricism” and the unstated, “silent” implications of her intervention at the PEM. As quoted earlier, she uses performance to “call attention to the artist as body” and to establish “a relationship with an audience which obligates them to reconsider the whole meaning of the work.” I argue, thus, that the project was more than a temporary installation originating at PEM but potentially able to travel. Instead, its full power, that is to say its silences, was intimately shaped by its location and by the performance Agridulce. Though ephemeral as a spatial and sensorial intervention, the performance signaled the continuation of the artist’s work with sugar as allegory and sign of colonial violence, and also of survival and witnessing, ours but more crucially hers. Rather than assimilating to the parameters of the commissioning institution, Campos-Pons’s installation and performance “interrupted” incomplete historical narratives and sought to bring to light the ways that the present, and evidently the foreseeable future, are still tethered to our collective pasts. In this regard, Campos-Pons challenged the distinctions between site-specific, functional, and discursive conceptual anchors in installation practice, and complicated the PEM’s interpretive framing.

Recently, Manu Vimalassery, Juliana Hu Pegues, and Alyosha Goldstein have brought forth the concept of “obstacologies of unknowing” in order to “critically analyze and confront the ways in which epistemologies of unknowing are instantiated.” As they discuss, scholars like Ann Laura Stoler and Jodi Byrd have theorized “epistemologies of ignorance” as “colonial aphasia” and “colonial agnosia,” respectively, while Leanne Simpson and Saidiya Hartman have complicated willful “colonial unknowing” by asserting the importance of modalities of “knowing otherwise.” For example, as Vimalassery, Hu Pegues, and Goldstein explain, Stoler’s formulation enables an examination of colonial history as “simultaneously known and unknown, resisting a method of apprehension and instead ruminating on the interstices between knowledge and ignorance, reflecting on the relationship between production, loss, and disassociation.” Byrd’s “colonial agnosia” is useful here to describe the kinds of dismissive and defensive measures that refuse to connect contemporary bodies, be they Indigenous, black, Asian, or Latinx, to systems of colonialism and imperialism. I suggest, therefore, that while Campos-Pons’s Cubaness and “exillessness” were prioritized in the curatorial framing of Alchemy of the Soul, Elixir for the Spirits, her performance destabilized that framing by reorienting visitors toward the often silenced historical, political, and economic relations between Africa, Cuba, New England, Asia, and the Americas writ large. Crucially, moreover, it set these relations in the here and now, as opposed to resolutely in the then and there (historical Cuba). In so doing, the artist invited museumgoers to listen to the “unsaid” in order to reframe their thinking on black and diasporic identities in the United States. With her installation and performance, Campos-Pons showed how these identities are constituted in relation to one another rather than as discrete, bounded, or static. There is no doubt that diasporic memory, Afro-Cuban history, and sugar have


106. I am grateful to María Magdalena Campos-Pons for confirming my interpretation of her conceptualization of the project overall as rooted in the relationship between Salem and Cuba, and of her performance as bringing the past into the present. Email communication with the author, February 15, 2018.
been central to Campos-Pons’s work, but by adding rum, so vital to the transatlantic political and cultural economy, to her repertoire and siting *Alchemy of the Soul, Elixir for the Spirits* at the PEM in Salem, she issued an epistemological challenge to locate meaning both *within* the art object and phenomenologically *within* the contingencies of its institutional context.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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